

Christmas Eve 2016
St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman, Oklahoma

This is the night when it all comes together. The planning, the arrangements made months in advance or only days, or even just mere hours ago are coming to fruition; the travelers are arriving, yesterday, tonight, tomorrow, coming from nearby and from far away. Some are coming joyfully and full of expectation; others come out of obligation or duty, or because they lost a bet, or to keep peace in the household.

This is the night when the cooks are peering into the soup pot, adding another cup of water and calculating how many pieces of cornbread they can get out of that pan in the oven because there's no time to send anyone to get more eggs at this late hour.

This is the night when the town is full, and the shelves at the stores are all but emptied, and not one bed remains unclaimed at any place of lodging—hotel, motel, guest room, living room sofa.

And in the midst of the gathering, and all the flurry and bustle and expectations and pressures, the hopes and fears of all our years, a sound calls out for attention: the sound of a newborn infant.

“A child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

We (or at least I) cannot hear the words of the scriptures tonight and not simultaneously hear the baroque strings of Handel's *Messiah* in the background.

“For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders; and his name shall be called: Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God; the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

I remember being very puzzled by those words as a child. “The government shall be upon his shoulders.” I had a mental picture of Jesus in the manger, with the Washington Monument and the Capital Building and the White House ranged across his upper back...

But as he later tells Pontius Pilate (and anyone else who will listen), his kingdom is not like the kingdoms and nation-states and power systems of this world. In contrast to all the kings and kingdoms, emperors and empires, presidents and power systems, he comes as the child of refugee parents, in a backwater town, in an occupied territory governed by foreign armies. What child is this, who laid to rest, in a feeding trough for barn animals, is sleeping?

And it was a real barn. With real animals. And real animal smells.

And the baby had to be fed and burped and diapered.
And fed again. And burped again. And diapered again.

“The little lord Jesus, no crying he makes”...Oh really?
It had to be a man who wrote that lyric.

At the end, when he is put to death as a threat to empire and emperor, the Cross stands at the side of a public road—in plain sight of passers-by, as a warning to those who would challenge the powers and principalities of this world.

And yet. And yet...the powers and principalities did not have the final word that Friday afternoon in Jerusalem. On the third day, the Lord God spoke yet again, as at the beginning of Creation, making a new beginning of all things: “Let there be...” and there was. Life out of death; deep peace even in the midst of fear and anxiety and confusion; a rag-tag group of friends who went running through the streets with their hair on fire to tell anyone who would listen (and even those who would not) of the glorious, unstopable, limitless love and mercy of God.

Thousands years and thousands of miles separate us from these events, and yet we gather tonight to remember. Not just “to think about something that happened back then” but to Re-Member. To put back together, and to be put back together ourselves, where we have been Dis-membered, pulled apart by forces that, quite frankly, profit by dis-memberment, by breaking and separating, by sowing fear and division.

You know those forces. You know their power.
The darkness is real.

The powers and principalities will do what they can to hold on to their privilege and prestige.
And yet... “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.”

Now, as then, the Christ comes to embody and offer another way, a way that is profoundly countercultural. A way of life that proclaims to any who will listen (and even those who will not) that same mercy, grace and welcome of a loving God, good news as old as time and as fresh and new as the child born tonight.

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.*

*He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait*

*till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.*

*In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

Madeleine L'Engle, "First Coming" in *A Cry Like A Bell* (Shaw Publishers: Wheaton IL, 1987)